



# Subtle Brutality: Decoding the Psychological Violence & Emotional Abuse in Relationships through Elif Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World

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(Received: 27 September 2025 Revised: 05 October 2025 Accepted: 10 November 2025)

## KEYWORDS

Relationship,  
Psychological Violence,  
Elif Shafak,  
Emotional Abuse,  
Invalidation,  
Self-discovery.

## ABSTRACT:

Psychological violence is a tactic to control, manipulate, or physically harm another person on an emotional or mental side. Freud's Theory of Personality, talks about a number of different factors that influence personality. The theory talks about the human psyche which is structured into three parts: Id, Ego, and Superego. In the novel, 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World by Elif Shafak, the character Leila can be considered the embodiment of elements of Sigmund Freud's Personality Theory, especially the concept of the superego. This study aims to critically analyze Elif Shafak's novel 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World and examine the impact of psychological abuse and self-presentation in relationships. It examines complex relationship themes such as belonging, power dynamics, sarcasm, resilience, and identity through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This article explores the main character who is a victim of emotional abuse and the impact this has on her sense of self. It highlights emotional abuse in relationships and its devastating effects. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of psychological abuse and its effects, while raising awareness and initiating discussions about the importance of healthy and respectful human relationships.

## 1. Introduction

The expression and impact of psychological violence in relationships is an important and current topic of exploration. Elif Shafak's novel, *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, delivers a thought-provoking story that brings depth and sensitivity to the subject matter. In the novel, the character Leila is the embodiment of Sigmund Freud's superego and her inner conflicts and feelings of guilt reflect the dominance of the Superego in Freud's Theory of Personality. The superego represents the moral component of the soul, internalizing the values and norms of society, guiding behavior towards moral correctness, and causing feelings of guilt when these norms are not met. Leila deals with societal moral standards, striving to behave in a socially responsible manner while feeling guilt when failing to meet these standards. Her conscience serves as an internal moral guide, and the Ideal Self represents her aspirations and the desire to conform to societal expectations.

Songyang Zhang (2020), in his article "Psychoanalysis: The Influence of Freudian Theory in Personality Psychology," states that the combination of the id, ego, and superego forms an individual's behavior and personality, which influences the individual's behavior in society. It states that it is determined by and represents interaction with others (231). Leila's character reflects the Superego's influence, highlighting the tension between her inner moral compass and external demands in a complex world. The paper examines the portrayal of psychological violence in the novel, its impact on the characters, and the broader societal implications it raises. Otto F. Kernberg (2012), in his article "Psychoanalysis: Freud's Theory and its Modern Developments," discusses personality development and psychopathology, methods of psychoanalytic research, and their evolution over time. Freud's ideas about the analytic approach to treatment are explained in detail and the course of his dramatically creative life gradually changed (293–305).

Diksha (2021), in her thesis titled *Spatial Composition in Selected Works of Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak*, describes Shafak as emphasizing the spirit of fusion and



the variety presented under one roof. She points out how Shafak inherited and inculcated the trait of seeing extreme things through contrasting themes. Shafaq focuses on the importance of all voices, without inequality or prejudice. She does not limit her themes to a particular space and almost always has her characters wander through other cultural spaces and have relevant knowledge of their surrounding environment (173). Moreover, the theory of the structure of mind that he postulated must have underlain the events that he clinically observed and has changed in important ways so that without tracing the history of his thought it is difficult to understand his views.

## 1.1 Complex layers of Freudian Concept

The novel *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World* tells a moving story about Leila, a sex worker in Istanbul. Leila deals with her memories and connections after a traumatic event, uniquely exploring her inner world. The protagonist Leila serves as a compelling lens through which one can explore Freudian concepts, particularly the superego. Leila's superego is a component of Freud's structural model representing internalized moral and social standards and is an important aspect of her personality. Drawing on her experiences in a conservative society and her upbringing, Leila struggles with the contradictory nature of her work and her societal expectations. The superego acts as a silent arbiter, enforcing moral judgments and fostering inner conflict that manifests as pervasive guilt.

Leila's search for love, acceptance, and meaningful connection can be seen through the lens of the influence of the superego. As Freud presumed, the superego encourages individuals to strive for an ideal version of themselves. For Leila, this manifests as a longing for emotional fulfilment, human connection, and a sense of belonging beyond social norms. Leila's introspection throughout the story is evidence of the influence of the superego. As she reflects on her life, her decisions, and her relationships, there is a clear sense of moral scrutiny. This superego-driven introspection leads Leila to evaluate her actions against internalized moral standards conveyed by society's expectations.

The novel subtly explores the influence of cultural and social factors on Leila's superego. The conservative environment in which she grew up leaves an indelible mark, shaping her moral values and self-esteem. As she navigates the dissonance between her chosen path and societal norms, the social judgment and prejudice associated with her profession increase her inner conflict. Essentially, the novel *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds of This Strange World* provides a rich tapestry for exploring Freudian concepts within the complex layers of Leila's personality.

The influence of the superego becomes a lens through which to interpret Leila's internal conflicts, her pursuit of an idealized self, and the influence of social and cultural influences on her moral compass. Shafaq's stories not only deal with the complexities of individual psychology but also offer deep insights into societal expectations and the human condition. This paper seeks to shed light on the destructive consequences of psychological abuse and emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing this issue. In the novel, the exploration of emotional neglect and its long-term psychological effects on the protagonist, Tequila Leila, is the central theme.

## 2. Emotional Neglect

Shafak skilfully describes the consequences of emotional neglect, highlighting its profound impact on an individual's self-esteem, identity, and emotional well-being. Throughout the story, Shafak presents a compelling depiction of Tequila Leila's childhood and upbringing, marked by emotional neglect in her family. Leila's father once scolded her for receiving a hula hoop from Sinan and for wearing lipstick. Shafak emphasizes emotional indifference through Leila's father's dialogue, "I can't believe you're acting like a...whore! Is this what you ultimately want to be? A Damn whore?" (*10 Minutes* 103). Leila's parents were distant and uncaring, unable to provide her with the love, attention, and emotional support she needed. Their abandonment leaves her isolated, unimportant, and emotionally abandoned, which shapes her perception of herself and her place in the world.

Shafak's depiction of Leila demonstrates self-doubt as she confesses her feelings, "Asking 'Why me? It's another way of saying, 'Why not someone else?' and she hates herself for it" (*10 Minutes* 67). In Leila's case, her character can be understood as the embodiment of Superego's domination. She experiences internal conflicts and feelings of guilt as she navigates a complex and morally fraught world. The superego operates according to moral principles, motivating individuals to behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner, which Leila strives to do. The long-term effects of emotional neglect on Leila are widespread. She grew up with a deep sense of emptiness, yearning for connection and affirmation. Her lack of emotional support and validation leaves her vulnerable in her search for love and validation. Additionally, Leila's emotional neglect reinforces her feelings of unworthiness and lack of confidence. She sees the neglect as a reflection of her own inadequacy, questioning her worth as a person.

### 2.1 Consequences

The internalized sense of self becomes a persistent theme throughout the novel as Leila struggles to manage her identity and find acceptance and belonging. The



consequences of emotional neglect are also evident in Leila's struggles with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. Examining the novel's narrative and characters helps investigate the different forms of psychological violence depicted and their consequences for individuals. The lack of emotional support and validation further exacerbates their feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. She struggled with a deep feeling of emptiness, trying to fill her inner void with external means. Shafak's depiction of emotional neglect in the novel highlights its impact on an individual's psychological and emotional health. Emotional abuse can have profound and lasting effects on a person's mental and emotional health. Humeyra, one of Leila's five friends, has completely changed her identity even though she doesn't like it.

Shafak represents how society and family shape the mind and create interest in certain things, "She changed her childhood name to Humeyra, got a fake identity card" (*10 Minutes* 59). It emphasizes the importance of connection, validation and emotional support in building self-esteem and overall mental health. Emotional neglect and emotional abuse are two different forms of abuse that can have a significant impact on your mental health and well-being. Emotional neglect refers to a caregiver's failure to provide adequate emotional support, reassurance, and attention to a child or dependent adult. It can take the form of neglecting emotional needs, withholding affection, or failing to create a safe and caring environment. Emotional abuse is intentional psychological harm to another person. It can take many forms, including verbal abuse, humiliation, manipulation, and intimidation. Emotional abuse can have long-term effects on self-esteem, self-worth, and the ability to form healthy relationships. In exploring it, Shafak invites readers to reflect on the long-term consequences of childhood neglect and the importance of providing nurturing and loving environments for individuals to thrive. The superego consists of two systems: Consciousness and the Ideal Ego. Leila's inner voice, her conscience, serves as her moral guide, telling her when she has done something wrong. This internal moral compass causes her to feel guilty when her actions or decisions do not correspond to social norms or her sense of right and wrong.

### 3. Gaslighting

In the novel, gaslighting is depicted as a form of psychological violence that impacts the protagonist, Tequila Leila. It is a type of interpersonal violence that can occur in a variety of settings, including intimate relationships, families, workplaces, and social circles. Shafak skilfully portrays the treacherous nature of gaslighting, highlighting its destructive effects on an

individual's perception of reality, self-confidence, and overall mental well-being.

'You are a naughty girl', Uncle said. He looked solemn, almost sad.

'You seem so sweet and innocent, but it is just a mask, isn't it?'

Deep down, you are just as dirty as everyone else. Bad behavior.

How have you deceived me? (*10 Minutes* 66-67)

Women bodies are one of the primary mediums through which violence is perpetrated and oppression is confirmed. Germaine Greer writes in her text *The Whole Woman* (2021), "The body is the battlefield where women fight for liberation. Her oppression acts on her body by objectifying her, sexualizing her, bullying her, and sabotaging her. A Woman's physicality is a medium for others to engage with. Her job is to act as her viceroy, offer her own body to her service, and administer prescribed treatments to her body. If she refuses to come forward or refuses to receive treatment, she is misbehaving" (*10 Minutes* 106). Gaslighting is a manipulation tactic used by abusers to distort victims' perceptions of reality and undermine their trust in their own perceptions and memories. Sadaf Shafi (2021), in his article "Motherhood and its Discontents, A Study on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Elif Shafak's *Black Milk*," argues that the monolithic glorification of motherhood makes it the ultimate goal of a woman's life. It's also about the creative alienation that some women face as they struggle to balance multiple roles at the same time. It also depicts the trauma of women who are unable to have children, but must undergo rigorous medical procedures, often at the expense of their health, in order to do so.

Throughout the novel, Shafak illustrates how Leila is subjected to criticism, mainly by her uncle and other important people in her life. The character Leila in Elif Shafak's novel is affected by the conflict between her internal moral compass and the demands of the outside world. She faces challenges in maintaining social norms while also dealing with her own personal desires and experiences. Through the lens of Freud's Personality theory, the character of Leila illustrates the influence of the Superego, which governs her decisions, actions, and emotions, as she seeks to adhere to her own set of moral standards imposed by society.

#### 3.1 Manipulation vs. Mental Health

Manipulation damages a person's mental health and self-esteem. Through denying or rejecting Leila's experiences and emotions, Shafak depicts the phenomenon of gaslighting in the novel. Those around her, including her



parents, consistently belittled her feelings, minimized them, and portrayed her as irrational or overly sensitive, “A feeling of guilt overwhelmed Leila, so strong that she could barely move. Tears welled up in his eyes. She tried not to cry but failed” (*10 Minutes* 67). The constant weakening of one’s reality and emotions erodes one’s confidence and creates doubt. Leila begins to question her own perceptions and doubts the authenticity of her experiences, leading to a profound sense of confusion and loss of identity.

Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex* (1949), critically examines the social structure of women as “others” and positions women in a subordinate role to men. The concept is deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts and addresses the ways in which women have been marginalized and defined in contrast to the supposedly universal male experience. In her work she aptly describes how women are treated as “other”. She writes, “Woman is defined and differentiated not as an independent and distinct entity, but in relation to man, He is the subject, he is the absolute, she is the other” (307). The constant denial of rights and the frustration of one’s own wishes and desires further burden a woman’s existence, making her feel suffocated and alienated. The effects of this “othering” dynamic are felt in social structures, norms, and individual psyches. Drawing parallels between Beauvoir’s observations and Elif Shafak’s *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World* reveals a deep examination of the experiences of her protagonist Leila through the lens of Freud’s superego. As a sex worker in Istanbul, Leila occupies a social niche that expresses female “otherness”. The stigma and judgment associated with her profession become an integral part of her superego, an internalized moral compass that is influenced by social norms.

Leila’s conflict arises from the dissonance between her chosen path and societal expectations rooted in the “otherness” of women, manifesting as a deep psychological conflict. The superego, invented by Freud, plays a central role in Leila’s inner world. Social norms associated with women’s “otherness” complicate women’s moral landscape and provide layers of guilt and introspection. The novel depicts Leila’s search for love and acceptance as an attempt to realize an ideal self shaped by society’s expectations and norms imposed on women as “other”. Cultural influences closely intertwined with women’s “otherness” continue to shape Leila’s superego. The social dynamics described by Beauvoir are not abstract concepts, but rather concrete forces that shape the protagonist’s morality and self-esteem. Leila’s disregard for social norms, particularly those regarding gender roles, appears as a form of rebellion against female “otherness” and highlights the tension between personal identity and societal expectations. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds*

*in This Strange World* combines Beauvoir’s exploration of woman as “other” and Freud’s superego in Leila’s analysis to create a rich tapestry. Weaving together societal expectations, personal identity, and an inner moral compass, it offers a nuanced portrayal of a woman navigating a world that attempts to define her as “other”. Leila’s journey reflects both the broader struggles women face in society and the complex interplay between psychological and social issues within the story.

#### 4. Psychological Abuse

Shafak describes gaslighting as a form of psychological abuse to highlight its detrimental impact on an individual’s psychological and emotional state. Through Leila’s experiences, the novel highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing sarcasm as a harmful and manipulative tactic used in relationships. Shafak’s exploration of gaslighting serves as a broader commentary on power dynamics, control, and gender inequality. Gaslighting is often a tool used by abusers to exert power and control over their victims, thereby perpetuating a cycle of abuse.

He groaned one last time and stopped moving. He was panting. There was a pungent smell in the air and the bed sheets were soaked. ‘Look what you did to me,’ he said when he found his voice again. Leila felt confused and embarrassed. Instinctively, she felt this was not right and that it should never have happened. It was his fault. (*10 Minutes* 66)

Women’s alienation begins with their bodies, which are most often abused and used as tools for sexual pleasure and experimentation. Abuse is complex and can include both physical and psychological aspects. These abuses have worst effects on women and make them unable to function properly. The novel challenges social norms and emphasizes the need to confront and dismantle the systems that allow gaslighting and psychological violence to continue to exist.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), expresses her views on how women are expected to do household chores and be good wives and mothers, subsuming their identities under established gender roles and controlling space and economics. She explains that women had no personal independence, while men enjoyed the luxury of a written education, built their own universities, earned university degrees, and embarked on various adventures, women were denied even basic rights such as the right to an education and the right to vote. They fought a tough battle to secure it (8-13). Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) deals with the historical limitations placed on women, especially in the areas of creativity and intellectual pursuits. In her essay, Woolf describes how social expectations and sexual roles



have limited women to domestic duties and relegated them to the role of wife and mother with little room for personal expression or autonomy. Combining Woolf's insights with Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, subtly explores how these historical expectations and gender roles affect the protagonist, Leila. As a sex worker in Istanbul, Leila occupies a social space that challenges traditional female roles. However, echoes of social expectations rooted in her historical norms remain in her story.

Woolf's assertion that women need physical and financial independence to pursue their creative endeavours resonates with Leila's journey. The restrictions placed on a woman to conform to her prescribed role as a wife and mother are subtly reflected in the social judgments and prejudices associated with Leila's unconventional profession. Social constraints on women are evident in both Woolf's observations and Shafak's story. Woolf's metaphorical advocacy of a "space of one's own"(53), a space in which women can develop their intellect and creativity, finds parallels with Leila's yearning for emotional and existential freedom. Leila's search for love, acceptance, and meaningful connection can be seen as an attempt to create her own emotional and psychological space in a society where women are often confined to predetermined roles. Furthermore, Woolf's critique of the patriarchal structures that limit women's access to education and economic independence is consistent with the challenges faced by Leila. Social norms that try to confine them to a particular narrative conflict with their personal aspirations and aspirations. Historical expectations of a woman are to be primarily a housewife and mother is reflected in Leila's experience, highlighting the ongoing impact of gender roles on women's lives. The interplay between Woolf's feminist critique and Shafak's consideration of social expectations in *10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World* creates a complex narrative. Leila's character becomes a lens through which readers can think about the historical constraints placed on women and their contemporary struggles to free themselves from those constraints. The novel is not only a poignant examination of personal identity, but also a broader commentary on the societal expectations that women continue to face in their quest for independence.

## 5. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is depicted in various relationships throughout the novel, including intimate partnerships, family relationships, and social interactions. Shafak describes psychological abuse as a systematic pattern of behavior intended to undermine the victim's confidence, self-esteem, and overall emotional well-being through her writings, "And you shouldn't make this up. Sometimes our minds play tricks on us" (*10 Minutes* 106). One of the

ways emotional abuse expressed is through the constant belittling, humiliating, and degrading of the victim. Leila endured derogatory comments, insults, and derogatory remarks from her parents and other people in her life. These abusive behaviors erode her self-esteem, making her worthless, needy, and unworthy of love and respect.

### 5.1 Fear and Doubt

The impact of the psychological abuse on Leila's self-esteem and identity was profound. She internalized the negative messages and beliefs that her attackers imposed on her, which led to doubt, self-blame, and a distorted perception of herself. Leila questions the value of love and acceptance in speech and sees abusive behavior as a reflection of her own inadequacy which affected her self-confidence and contributed to a fractured sense of identity, "Leila was so worried, the knot in her stomach was eating her up. She was afraid someone would recognize her. What will she do if the man walking next to her turns out to be one of her former customers?"(*10 Minutes* 165). Fear and doubt about the past, affect one's present. Even after marrying D/Ali, she could not live a happy and peaceful life for fear that someone would recognize and judge her past.

### 5.2 Invalidation

Leila, subjected to constant psychological violence, internalizes negative messages conveyed by her own parents. She begins to believe that she is not worthy of love, respect, and happiness. This diminished self-esteem becomes ingrained, shaping a person's perception of themselves and affecting the ability to form healthy relationships in the future. Elif Shafak's portrait of the constant invalidation and devaluation experienced by victims further contributes to the deterioration of mental health, "Shame and self-blame have been Leila's constant companions in for a long time, two shadows followed her wherever she went" (*10 Minutes* 98). Leila's abusers dismissed her feelings, undermined her, and undermined her reality, leaving her confused, isolated, and doubting her own sanity. This manipulation and denial of one's experiences leads to anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness. The long-term effects on her mental health left her in a state of inner turmoil, struggling to find stability and inner peace. Additionally, the long-term impact on victims' mental health is evident in their difficulty trusting and forming healthy relationships.

### 5.3 Self-Discovery

The long-term effects on self-esteem and mental health described in the novel emphasize the need for healing, support, and resilience. Shafak explores the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and reclaiming his worth. Through friendship, community, and introspection, Leila gradually begins to rebuild her self-esteem and find the



strength to escape the cycle of abuse, “Every few minutes, D/Ali would turn his sharp gaze towards Leila to see how she was doing. He never let go of his hand” (*10 Minutes* 166). Her resilience demonstrates her ability to heal and grow, even in the face of severe emotional trauma. Through the protagonist’s experiences, Shafak describes the progressive erosion of self-esteem, the long-term impact on mental health, and the challenges of establishing healthy relationships. The novel serves as a reminder of the importance of recognizing and addressing psychological abuse, fostering resilience, and assisting survivors in regaining their self-esteem and spiritual healing.

## 6. Conclusion

Shafak deals with the complexities of relationships, unweaving the layers of gaslighting, psychological and emotional abuse, emotional manipulation, invalidation, and the overarching impact on mental health. Through the lens of vivid characters and powerful storytelling, Shafak not only exposes the devastating nature of such abuse, but also intricately weaves a tapestry of resilience, survival, and the pursuit of healing. With a nuanced examination that aligns with Freud’s personality theory, particularly the superego concept, it provides an appealing backdrop for exploring psychological violence. Throughout the novel, characters struggle with the ever-present influence of social norms, family expectations, and cultural structures, reflecting Freud’s concept of the superego as an internalized moral compass.

Shafak skillfully reveals the impact of this inner conflict on mental health and depicts the damage that psychological violence does to the psyche of the characters. The superego becomes a prism through which readers witness the characters’ struggles for autonomy and self-acceptance in the face of oppressive social norms. Shafaq’s novel is not only consistent with Freudian psychology, but also about the ongoing effects of psychological violence and the urgent need for social introspection and change which also provokes consideration. In light of Freud’s ongoing revelations about the intricacies of the human mind, it highlights the importance of mental health promotion, reducing harmful power dynamics, and encouraging individual autonomy.

Shafaq not only examines the immediate effects of psychological violence, but also stimulates broader societal reflection on the need for empathy, understanding, and the dismantling of harmful norms. Drawing on Freud’s enduring insights into the complex workings of the human psyche, this novel prioritizes mental health, challenges oppressive power dynamics, and creates a more compassionate, inclusive world. It is a persuasive call to advance society. The main takeaway from this article is the urgent need for social introspection and

change. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* novel fosters a deeper understanding of the lasting effects of psychological violence and the importance of promoting psychological well-being. This serves as a powerful reminder of the inherent tension between personal authenticity and social conformity, prompting a collective reassessment of cultural norms and power structures. Embracing diversity, challenging oppressive norms, and prioritizing mental health support systems are essential steps to creating a more caring environment.

The work of Shafaq facilitates discussions that promote individual autonomy, dissolve negative power structures, and foster a culture that values the multifaceted nature of humanity. As readers engage with this article, they will not only reflect on the characters’ journeys but also imagine a world where understanding and empathy triumph over psychological violence and pave the way for healing and authentic relationships.

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